

It will send a direct check to Americans struggling with a once-in-a-lifetime financial burden. It will boost vaccine distribution. And it will provide funding and guidance for schools to reopen as quickly and safely as possible.

That last point, in particular, should appeal to my Republican friends who have been raising concern about school closures. We all want the schools to reopen safely. We are all worried about the cost of virtual learning on children and parents.

The solution is simple. It is not giving a speech here on the Senate floor. It is not criticizing teachers or school administrators. It is giving school districts the funding they need to reopen safely. It is expensive—expensive—to reopen safely during the COVID crisis. We want to do it as quickly as possible, and it is hard to understand that our Republican friends are saying: “Open up the schools” and “I won’t vote for any money for the schools” to do just that. It is a complete contradiction.

The Republican position seems to be that these difficult challenges will fix themselves, that we don’t need any more aid; we did enough already. Anyone who knows anything about schools knows, in the vast majority of schools in this country, that is just not the case.

So let our Republican friends put their votes where their speeches are, in helping the schools, in getting the money, in opening the schools safely—not in simply trying to make a political point and then trashing the schools without giving them the money they need. It makes no sense whatsoever. It is a total contradiction.

Also, if we don’t act, enhanced unemployment benefits will expire for millions of Americans in need. If we don’t act, millions of struggling families will miss out on direct payments and an expansion of the child tax credit and the earned income tax credit. If we don’t act, we risk the same long, slow, and painful recovery we experienced after the financial crisis of 2008, when Congress did too little to get our country back on track.

The worst thing we could do would be to slow down now before the race is won. We will not do that. Later this week, the House—and, soon thereafter, the Senate—will start working on President Biden’s American Rescue Plan.

Mayors, Governors, and economists from across the political spectrum agree that it should be a sizable effort. Treasury Secretary Yellen told us that “the smartest thing we can do is act big.” Federal Chairman Powell warned that we are “a long way off from full recovery” and that the greater risk lies in doing too little rather than doing too much.

Most importantly, the American people in poll after poll overwhelmingly approve of President Biden’s American Rescue Plan. One of the last polls I saw showed a majority of Republicans—vot-

ers, citizens, Americans, Republican citizens, Republican Americans—agree with this plan. The Nation understands that we are not out of the woods yet and that Congress should do what is necessary to finish the job. Where are our Republican friends?

As I have said from the start, Democrats remain committed to working with our colleagues from the other side of the aisle to improve the bill, but at the end of the day, the American people sent us here with a job to do, and the clock is ticking. Democrats will not wait to move forward with the American Rescue Plan and taking the next important step in getting our country back to normal.

PROTESTS

Mr. President, finally, January 6 is a day all of us will remember forever. The Capitol was breached by a violent mob. The Confederate flag was flown in the halls of our Union for the first time in American history. Insurrectionists—angry, bigoted—stood a few inches from where I am standing now. It is hard to believe these hallowed halls were occupied by such terrible, awful lawbreakers. Five Americans lost their lives, including a Capitol Police officer.

The impeachment of Donald Trump was one necessary consequence of the attack of January 6, but it is far from the only one. We must and will continue to reckon with the events of that day. This morning—in fact, as we speak—the Senate Rules Committee and the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee are holding a joint hearing to examine the attack on the Capitol. The committees will hear important testimony from the acting chief of the Capitol Police, the former chief of police, and former members of the Sergeant at Arms. Later this week, Senators will be briefed by the acting chief of police and the Acting Sergeant at Arms on the current and future security measures around the Capitol.

It is our solemn responsibility to protect the Capitol and everyone who works and visits within it. It is our solemn duty to prevent a day like January 6 from ever, ever being repeated. At the same time, the Capitol has been and must be once again a symbol of democracy that is accessible to the people. No one expects the Capitol to remain a militarized zone in perpetuity. As I said, no one expects the Capitol to remain a militarized zone in perpetuity. We must strive to strike the difficult balance between access and security and better understand the intelligence and security failures that led to the attack on January 6. This will be a crucial and bipartisan undertaking. I am glad that Senators from both the Rules and Homeland Security Committees, from both parties, are starting that important work today.

I now yield the floor.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Republican leader is recognized.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, millions of American kids in the public school system have been robbed of a year, and counting, of anything resembling a proper education. It has been a historically tough year. That is why Americans are so excited our Nation appears to be approaching a major turning point.

Here are just a few recent headlines: A U.S. Vaccine Surge Is Coming, With Millions of Doses Promised

Another headline:

America’s vaccine rollout has been among the best in the world

Another headline:

CDC finds scant spread of coronavirus in schools with precautions in place

Here is one from my home State:

COVID-19 cases plummet in Kentucky nursing homes, a key target for the vaccine

So let’s take a look at the economy:

U.S. Retail Sales Surprise With Sharpest Advance in Seven Months

Blue-Collar Jobs Boom as COVID-19 Boosts Housing, E-Commerce Demand

Another headline:

Consumer Demand Snaps Back. Factories Can’t Keep Up.

To be clear, this isn’t over. The battle is not won yet. But the day is approaching when we will be able to end this defensive crouch and safely reclaim our normal lives.

Last year the Senate built the largest peacetime fiscal expansion in American history. We spent \$4 trillion on five overwhelmingly bipartisan packages. The most recent became law just 2 months ago. Funding for hospitals and providers kept our healthcare system above water. The Paycheck Protection Program saved Main Street small businesses. Direct relief and extra unemployment aid helped working families endure the shutdown. Operation Warp Speed laid the groundwork for our historic sprint toward vaccinations.

These were strong, bipartisan policies, targeted to what families specifically needed to wage the war, but today Democrats are steamrolling ahead with a massive spending plan on a completely partisan basis. It did not receive a single House Republican vote in committee yesterday because their partisan plan is not targeted toward helping Americans reclaim their lives and their country from this invader. Instead, here is what it is: a combination of miscellaneous, non-COVID-related, liberal wish-list items and the kinds of bandaid policies that make a defensive crouch slightly less painful but don’t help get us back on offense.

Let’s take a look at K-12 schooling. Until very recently, the new administration’s own scientists had been crystal clear. Earlier this month, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said:

There is increasing data to suggest that schools can safely reopen.

A major CDC study found in-person schooling does not—not—fuel community transmission.

Last month, Dr. Fauci said:

It's less likely for a child to get infected in the school setting than if they were just in the community.

But Big Labor special interests didn't appreciate science undercutting their political goals. The empire struck back, and the Democratic leaders who love to claim the mantle of science ran away from the science as fast as they could. Now the CDC Director admits that "the lived experiences"—whatever that is—of government employees got between the hard science and the final guidance. It is a lot of points for cancer.

The unions had spoken. The goalposts were on the move. And the White House keeps endorsing the idea that schools need the Democrats' new spending plan to reopen, when the science disagrees. And furthermore, just 5 percent—5 percent—of what they propose to spend on schools would even be spent this year. Let me say that again. In this big COVID package, only 5 percent of what they propose to spend on schools would be spent this year. In other words, the spendout is over years ahead. You would think their view is, we are never going to get over the coronavirus.

The United Kingdom just announced they will have kids back in school in less than 2 weeks—2 weeks. Countries like Spain and France have had kids in classrooms for months already. The European Centre for Disease Prevention has no problem affirming the science—that closing schools is "unlikely to provide significant additional protection of children's health." Even here at home, private and religious schools have been teaching kids in person for months without causing any explosion in the spread of the virus.

Science tells us unambiguously that in-person schooling can be quite safe and that having young children spend all day staring into a laptop is a nightmare. The evidence is crystal clear. Big Labor bureaucrats keep refusing to follow the science.

In my hometown of Louisville, our union-backed school board vice chairman now asserts, with no evidence:

I think we're probably likely to see better instructional outcomes . . . if we stay [remote] for the rest of the school year.

Ridiculous. No facts. No evidence. Just a personal whim. These are the people controlling our kids' futures and their parents' lives.

One anonymous teacher told reporters:

We already have a schedule and a routine going. We don't need to be babysitting for six weeks because parents are upset.

Let me say that again.

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By the way, failing grades in middle schools are up 388 percent in our county. Failing grades in middle schools are up 388 percent in our county while these kids are stuck at home.

The Biden administration has a clear obligation to tackle the special interest madness head-on. Our kids are suffering, not because science says they must be—it doesn't. It is just because a small group of powerful grownups has decided they prefer it this way. Instead, the White House keeps parroting the anti-science myths. They back this notion that schools need the Democrats' new spending plan before they can reopen, except that science completely disagrees—completely; except that only a tiny fraction of the funding request would even be spent this fiscal year.

Our children's futures are literally at stake. The administration has got to stop taking orders from the public sector unions that give generously to Democratic campaigns. This is exhibit A in why relief legislation must be targeted to the actual needs we face now. American families should be the starting point, not preconceived political priorities.

NOMINATION OF XAVIER BECERRA

Now, Mr. President, on one related matter, today, our colleagues on the HELP Committee will question Xavier Becerra, President Biden's nominee to run the Department of Health and Human Services.

Amid a global pandemic, the President has made a puzzling selection for this crucial post: the famously partisan attorney general of California. Mr. Becerra has no particular experience or expertise in health. His chief passion project in California seemed to be using the force of the government to attack Americans' religious liberty and freedom of conscience.

In 2017, the Department he is nominated to lead finally provided a religious exemption to a controversial ObamaCare mandate. Mr. Becerra led the lawsuit to challenge it. He used his taxpayer-funded office to sue Catholic nuns who didn't want government to force them to violate their beliefs. This is a pattern with Mr. Becerra. When a California law forcing pro-life crisis pregnancy centers to advertise abortion was challenged in court, Mr. Becerra defended it to the bitter end.

His absurd position in favor of government-compelled speech was slapped down by the Supreme Court. Over the last 2 years, the HHS Office for Civil Rights literally has had to hold California and Mr. Becerra in violation of conscience protections that are actually written into Federal law. His zealous refusal to respect the citizens' legal rights positioned his State to potentially forfeit hundreds of millions of dollars in HHS funding. That is how committed they were to these violations. And now the fox wants to guard the henhouse?

We will review Mr. Becerra's testimony today, but I am hard-pressed to see any way such a radical and underqualified nominee should fill such a critical post at this crucial time.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. PADILLA). The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, in his inaugural address, President Biden spoke about his desire to unify.

He said this:

Today, on this January day, my whole soul is in this: bringing America together, uniting our people, uniting our nation.

Admirable words, but words have to be met with action, and, right now, we are not seeing much of an attempt to unify from the President or his party. In fact, we are seeing pretty much the opposite. The Democrats have made it very clear they are determined to pass another COVID bill on a purely partisan basis, which is particularly disappointing because, up until now, COVID relief has been a bipartisan process. That is right. To date, Congress has passed five COVID relief bills, and every single one of those bills has been overwhelmingly bipartisan.

I might add, last year, when we were in the majority, Senate Democrats made it very clear that they thought the minority should have a voice in COVID relief and that any legislation should reflect the thoughts of both parties. The Democratic leader filibustered the CARES Act—our largest COVID relief bill—multiple times until he got a version that he was satisfied with, but now that the Democrats are in the majority, apparently, they have decided that it is their way or the highway. Forget the fact that the Senate is evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats. The Democrats are determined to ensure that the Republicans and the Americans they represent don't have a voice in this bill.

The Democrats' move to use reconciliation to force through a purely partisan COVID bill might be understandable—and I add "might"—if the Republicans had made it clear that we opposed doing anything else on COVID, but that couldn't be further from the truth. The Republicans have made it very clear that we are willing to work with the Democrats on additional targeted relief. Just weeks ago, 10 Republican Senators put together a plan and met with President Biden for 2 hours to discuss a bipartisan agreement, but while the President certainly listened to them graciously, it quickly became clear that their efforts didn't matter. It didn't matter how willing the Republicans were to negotiate; the Democrats had no intention of reaching an agreement. They wanted to go it alone, and they were not going to let the Republicans stop them.

In a speech a few days ago, President Biden acknowledged that people have criticized his \$1.9 trillion plan but asked:

What would they have me cut? What would they have me leave out?